

Exorcism in the Holy Orthodox Church

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The Doctrine of Evil

To understand the Orthodox view and practice of exorcism, one must know the Orthodox presuppositions of evil and its doctrine of Satan. The patristic evidence points to the fact that the cause of evil in the world is the devil. The devil was created by God as an angel, who was free, and as a free agent chose to oppose the plan of God. That is, the devil is a fallen angel. Satan is not evil by nature, but by will and action. In Satan there is no truth whatsoever; he is absolute falsehood and deception. Satan is not just a negation or deprivation of good, but a positive force with free will that always chooses evil. The devil has the ability to recognize divine power, as in the incident of recognizing Christ as the Son of God (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-3). Satan has under his leadership legions and invisible powers, with their own "satanic teachings." The devil and evil spirits know that God exists and recognize true and devoted Christians, but pious Christians discern the plans of the devil. The devil, however, constantly employs every method of deception to enslave man to satanic forces and causes rebellion against God. He is the cause of corruption and disorder, a parasitic power in the world that will ultimately be destroyed by the power of God in the "last days." Because there is no compromise between God and the devil, the struggle will continue until the end.

The Orthodox doctrine of God is that He is eternal, uncreated and incorporeal. All other creatures, both visible and invisible, were created by God as free. The power of the devil will ultimately be destroyed by the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of creation. Salvation from all evil will be attained by obedience to God and His plan. This world is a battleground between the acceptance of good and evil. It must be pointed out that the world as the creation of God is not evil. What is evil is the satanic power, destroyed by the power of the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

The Orthodox Tradition of Exorcising

After examining the doctrine of Satan in the Orthodox Church, it is imperative to proceed to the method of repelling and exorcising the evil powers. In the New Testament, Christ sent out His apostles to heal and to "cast out devils" (Matt. 10:8, Luke 10:17-20). Christ Himself often expels demons from the possessed (Mark 1:23-27; Luke 4:33-35, 9:43; Matt. 10:1; Mark 16:17; Matt. 7:22). The New Testament, however, rejected popular uses of magic incantations and rites to expel the satanic powers from people, because they took advantage of superstitious religiosity (Acts 19:13).

In the name of Christ, one is able to cast out demons and to destroy the evil powers (Matt. 10:8). The Fathers of the Church accepted this doctrine and expanded on it. Justin Martyr (Apology 85, 2) says that in the name of Christ, the Son of God who was crucified and rose again, every demon that is exorcised is defeated and submits (Library of the Greek Fathers and Church Writers, Athens: Apostolike Diakonia 1955, Vol. 3, pp. 288-89). The satanic powers are destroyed through the power of the cross and the name of Christ. Objects possessed by demons, when exorcised in the name of the living God, are freed from the possession of evil. The patristic evidence is abundant in the belief in possession and expulsion of the devil by the power of the word of God (Ignatios, Epistles to Philippians 3 and 12; Library of the Greek Fathers and Church Writers, Vol. 2, pp. 333 and 336; Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 4:14; Library, Vol 8, p. 82; Origen, Against Celsus, 6:44; Library, Vol. 10, p. 93).

The demonic possession of individuals and even of objects, has been accepted by the Orthodox Church today in the Sacrament of Baptism, in exorcising satanic powers in the case of the evil eye (vaskania), and in exorcising the devil in the case of a possessed person. In the early Church exorcisms were performed by a person especially trained and appointed to pray to drive out evil from those about to be baptized. Since the fourth century the place of the exorcist, as well as other functions and ministries, have been taken over by the priest. The exorcisms are prayers that invoke God to expel evil spirits. The priest prays to expel all evil, the spirit of error, of idolatry, of covetousness, of Iying and every impure act that arises from the teachings of the devil. The renunciation of the devil in baptism is used in every baptism that is performed in the Orthodox Church.

Vaskania

The exorcism of satanic powers is also performed by the Orthodox Church in other rites, such as that of the evil eye (vaskania).

Vaskania is simply a phenomenon that was accepted by primitive people as fact. They believed that certain people have such powerful feelings of jealousy and envy, that when they looked on some beautiful object or individual it brought destruction. Vaskania is recognized by the Church as the jealousy and envy of some people for things they do not possess, such as beauty, youth, courage or any other blessing. The Church essentially rejected Vaskania as contradicting the concept of divine providence. The prayers of the Church to avert the evil eye are, however, a silent recognition of this phenomenon as a morbid feeling of envy. The Church forbids people to go to "readers" or other individuals for use of magical rituals to overcome the evil eye. These readers take advantage of the weakness of superstitious people and destroy them spiritually and financially by playing upon their imagination.

There is also a secret rite performed by superstitious people to avert the evil eye, which verges on magic. Though the Church encourages even the laity to pray and exorcise evil, it rejects magical practices and rites. This secret rite is described as follows: "The exorcist (not a priest but an old woman) prepares a vial of olive oil and a small glass of water. She dips a finger in the oil, rubs it in a sign of the Cross on the victim's forehead and lets one drop fall onto the water; she repeats the process, making a cross on the forehead, on the chin and both cheeks. If the devil is indeed present, the four drops of oil in the water join to form the ellipsoid shape of an eye. The ritual then calls for the reading of prayers and repeating the four signs of the Cross; the drops of oil will not join in the water, but will disperse."

The possession of individuals by the devil and demonic powers and the cure in the name of Christ is evidenced in the New Testament (Acts 3:2-8, 9:32-42; 20:7-12; Matt. 10:8; Mark 16:17-18). The Church continues in its liturgical rites what Christ enacted in His ministry. The Church recognizes the influence of evil and renounces it in the name of Christ in prayers and fasting. The prayers of exorcism in the early Church were offered by special ministry through the exorcist. This is evidenced from the early prayers that have survived. From the fourth century onwards, the ministry

of the exorcist has been fulfilled by the priest.

Orthodox Prayers of Exorcism

All the Orthodox prayer books include prayers of exorcism used by priests to fight the power of evil. The Orthodox Book of Prayers (Euchologion To Mega) includes three prayers of exorcism by Saint Basil and four by Saint John Chrysostom. They are read "for those who suffer from demonic possessions and every other malady." Through these prayers, the devil is exorcised (renounced) "in the name of God Almighty and the Lord Jesus Christ, and commanded to come out of the victim, who is liberated and redeemed by the eternal God from the energies (powers) of the impure spirits. The great ills that humanity suffers are attributed to the devil and demonic power."

From the Orthodox theological point of view, the following can be considered exorcists:

1. Christ is the exorcist *par excellence* for it is He who won the victory over the power of the devil.
2. Priests in the performance of the holy sacraments and in preaching the word of God follow Christ's example.
3. All Orthodox Christians are exorcists as they struggle against personal sin and social evil. In fact, "the whole Church, past, present and future, has the task of an exorcist to banish sin, evil, injustice, spiritual death, the devil from the life of humanity." Archbishop Iakovos, in a sermon at the Sage Chapel, Cornell University, spoke on exorcism in the following manner: "Both healing and exorcising are ministered through prayers, which spring from faith in God and from love for man.... All the prayers of healing and exorcism, composed by the Fathers of the Church and in use since the third century, begin with the solemn declaration: In Thy Name, O Lord.' " (Exorcism and Exorcists in the Greek Orthodox Tradition, March 10, 1974.)

In summary, the four prayers of exorcism by Saint John Chrysostom and the three of Saint Basil ask in the name of God to deliver the possessed from the captivity of the devil. Some can be healed by faith accompanied by fasting and purification. The use of exorcism must be made with discretion and great care. (For details, see G. Papademetriou, "Exorcism and the Greek Orthodox Church," in Exorcism Through the Ages, New York: Philosophical Library, 1974.)

Exorcism (Greek: *Εξορκισμος*) is the rite of prayer which expels demons from a person or physical object. The most common use of exorcism in the Church is at the reception of a catechumen, which is most often included at the beginning of the baptismal rite, and during the Great Blessing of Water which is done on the baptismal waters and at Theophany. An exorcism may also be performed if it is believed that a person is suffering from demonic influence.

> Exorcism is the practice of expelling evil spirits by means of prayer or set formulas adopted by the Christian Church from pre-Christian practices. Christ Himself and his Apostles practiced exorcism for the people possessed. (See Matthew 10:1 and foll; Luke 11:14 and foll; Acts 16:18, 19:13 and foll.). Exorcism has been practiced on persons possessed by an evil spirit all through the development of the Christian Church beginning with New Testament times. The most well-known exorcisms are those applied to Catechumens about to be baptized. Since infant Baptism was introduced in the Church, the statements denouncing Satan and accepting Christ are given by the Godfather/mother in the place of the candidate to be baptized. The Orthodox exorcisms before Baptism are four in number. Following them, and after the candidate or sponsor gives the affirmations in Christ, he is required to recite the

Nicene Creed as the final seal of a successful candidacy.
It should be noted here at this point that the Orthodox exorcisms are in essence prayers for averting the influence of evil spirits rather than for expelling the devil, especially in ceremonies such as sanctifying the waters (Hagiasmos), blessing the ceremonial oil, or blessing sacred vessels. It should also be noted that the importance of exorcism in Orthodox ecclesiastical life is not as great as it is in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. In recent years certain semi-pagan exorcistic rituals have been practiced by a number of people uncertain as to their religious belonging, including clergymen of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. Assuming the role of an exorcist is a serious offense against the Church's conception of evil and of the sacramental means by which it should be warded off. Needless to say, evil in man, whether personified or not, naturally requires the help of the Church for its expulsion but, above all, requires the spiritual strength of the individual concerned.[1] ...

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